



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

"I had six honest serving men [persons]; they taught me all I knew: Their names were Where and What and When and Why and How and Who."

— Rudyard Kipling

OVERVIEW

Students cultivate a curious mindset by learning how to ask powerful questions. Through a hands-on activity, they practice crafting questions that foster deeper curiosity and more meaningful conversations.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To cultivate stronger relationships among students
- To foster a non-judgmental classroom climate
- To practice questioning skills
- To help students develop the skill of self-awareness

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students OR Teachers OR School Staff will:

- Understand the ingredients that make a question powerful
- Learn about the differences between weak and powerful questions
- Understand that deep curiosity can be a tool for connecting with others
- Learn how to develop powerful questions that reflect deep curiosity

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Curiosity
- Courage
- Empathy

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Focused Attention

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Try the practice yourself. Then, reflect on the following:
 - What kinds of questions do you typically ask your colleagues?
 - What do you wish you could learn about them?
 - What kinds of questions do you wish your colleagues would ask you?
 - When do you know your question is "weak" or "powerful"?
- Brainstorm several powerful questions that are age-appropriate for your students. Keep a list of powerful questions handy in case some students need support in coming up with questions independently.

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

Deep curiosity, when channeled appropriately, can be a powerful tool for building meaningful relationships. Asking rich, "powerful" questions nurtures deep curiosity and helps us get to know others more intimately. By going beyond "weak" questions, we demonstrate respect for the other person, honoring their humanity and dignity. When we dig deeper, we show genuine interest and concern for the person in front of us, fostering a more meaningful connection.

However, it's natural to draw a blank when thinking of relevant questions to ask in real-life situations, such as when you are with friends on a school trip or you're sitting in the cafeteria eating lunch. So why not make a list of questions beforehand and keep it handy? That way, you can make the most of your curiosity-driven conversations!

But how do you know if a question is worth adding to your list? There are four things that distinguish weak questions from more powerful ones.

1. **The question is open-ended:** Ask yourself if the question can be answered with just a "Yes," "No," or another brief response. If so, it will likely not lead to a meaningful conversation. Try starting with "Why," "What," or "How."
2. **The question is rooted in genuine interest or concern:** Consider whether you are asking a leading question that simply confirms something you want to believe. Such questions can come across as predatory (invasive, self-serving, or exploitative). Instead, aim to foster genuine interest in or concern for the person you are speaking with.
3. **The question is appropriate for the relationship:** Put yourself in the other person's shoes and consider whether you would be comfortable answering the question. While the goal is to go beyond surface-level conversation, be mindful of how close you are to the other person before delving into sensitive topics.
4. **The question is original:** Common questions like "How are you?" are often overused and become routine. To spark interest, try asking something more novel.

See the table below for examples of weak and powerful questions.

Weak Questions	Powerful Questions
Are they not interested in being friends with you? (Closed-ended)	It seems like you are feeling unsure about the friendship. What makes you think they might not be interested in being friends? (Open-ended)
You have lost a lot of weight, haven't you? You are looking really skinny—are you sure you're okay? (Inauthentic/Predatory)	I noticed you haven't been eating much at lunch this week. I just wanted to check in—how are you doing? (Authentic/Genuinely concerned)

Hi, stranger, are you happy in your life? How much money do you make? (Inappropriate)	What activities bring you joy? What are some things you find really fulfilling? (Appropriate)
How was your trip? (Cliché)	What did you do during your trip that gave you a new perspective? Did anything change your mind? (Original)

Here are some additional examples of powerful questions:

- *What excites you about school? What part of school do you not enjoy? (vs. Do you like this school?)*
- *What are the most important things you look for in a friendship? Why? (vs. Who would you most like to be friends with in our class?)*
- *How do you feel about tests? How do you prepare for tests? What do you do in the week before tests? (vs. How did you do on the test? What grade did you get?)*
- *Have you changed your mind about something you believed in for a long time? What made you change your mind? (vs. How can you believe in X thing?)*

Let's create a list of powerful questions with a simple exercise:

1. Imagine a situation where you might lean into your deep curiosity—a dinner with your family, a walk with a friend, or a conversation with a stranger on the bus. What would you like to know about them to understand them more deeply? Think of things beyond the usual information, such as their education or work. You might want to learn about their:
 - Personal values and beliefs
 - Life experiences
 - Aspirations and goals
 - Relationships and connections
 - Passions and interests
 - Emotional life
 - Challenges and growth
 - Philosophical or spiritual views
 - Cultural background and identity
 - Fears and vulnerabilities
2. Now, think of 8-10 questions based on the areas listed above and write them down. Refer to the table above for examples. (Note: If nothing comes to mind, try seeking help from the Internet or generative AI tools like ChatGPT for brainstorming.)
3. Review each of your questions against the four criteria for powerful questions mentioned earlier. See if you need to adjust the wording. (You can also use generative AI tools like ChatGPT to refine your questions.)
4. Ask yourself the powerful questions you have added to your list first. How do they make you feel? If in doubt, soften the question by adding more empathetic words while reminding yourself of the appropriate tone (kind, gentle, open, positive, genuinely interested, non-accusatory) you should use when asking these questions.
5. Now, swap your list of questions with someone in your class. Ask them to review your questions, and in exchange, review theirs. Suggest changes to make each other's questions more powerful.
6. Save the list of revised questions somewhere easily accessible, such as a notepad on your phone.
7. After your pair conversation, reflect on one or more of the following questions as a whole group:
8. What areas of inquiry did you naturally lean toward?

9. What questions did you avoid or feel reluctant or hesitant to ask?
10. What care might you take when asking these questions?
11. Did you find this exercise helpful? In what ways?
12. Powerful questions can be uncomfortable because of the uncertainty they bring. How might you handle the discomfort that comes with deep curiosity?

CLOSURE

Ask your students:

- How might you use your list of powerful questions in the future? Where? In what situations?

Next Steps:

Encourage students to practice deep curiosity by using their list of questions in real-life situations, as appropriate.

Ask students to:

- Keep their list of questions dynamic. Add new questions to the list as they come to mind, and remind them not to lock themselves into their initial list.
- Ask themselves their own questions and reflect on the answers they would give. Encourage them to explore their inner selves with curiosity as well.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Do students demonstrate an understanding of the differences between weak and powerful questions? How do their questions reflect this?
- Do students understand how to apply the four criteria for powerful questions when drafting their questions?
- Are there ways I, as a teacher, can integrate powerful questions into future lessons, class meetings, or other contexts at school?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Curiosity is the driver of learning. It is closely linked to students' [academic performance](#). Specifically, curiosity is one of the strongest predictors of academic success in both math and reading for both [children](#) and [teenagers](#). As teachers and learners, our language (including the questions we ask) can significantly influence our [curiosity and attitudes about learning](#). Questions can be powerful tools to foster a sense of [joyful exploration](#) in a classroom. Studies also show that students' curiosity is linked to their [life satisfaction, positive emotions, hope, purpose in life](#), as well as [self-compassion](#).

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Curiosity serves as a motivational drive in almost all human activities, ranging from gathering information to solving the mysteries of the world around us. Students acquire new knowledge about language, relationships, and

surroundings through their curiosity. Science thrives on curiosity. More importantly, curiosity plays a crucial role in fostering [well-being and finding meaning in life](#), especially in highly uncertain and challenging times such as the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) and [among young adults](#).

Curiosity [promotes](#) engagement, responsiveness, and flexibility to other's diverse perspectives, thereby helping in building social bonds and positive relationships in school and beyond. Leading with deep curiosity allows us to challenge our assumptions and biases, which is especially important in the times of social isolation and loneliness. As a counter to rising societal polarization and social divides, curiosity can help us build bridges with those who we do not necessarily agree with.

SOURCE

This practice was adapted based on an exercise introduced in *Seek: How Curiosity Can Transform Your Life And Change The World* by Scott Shigeoka